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Stories of Practitioner Enquiry: Using Narrative Interviews to Explore Teachers' Perspectives of learning to learn

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Abstract

The Campaign for Learning's *Learning to Learn in Schools Project Phase 4* (Wall *et al.* 2010), is a research project in which teachers have been exploring pedagogic innovation under the umbrella term of Learning to Learn (L2L); working to identify, individually and collectively, what L2L looks like and how best to implement it in practice. In 2008 in order to gain greater understanding of what it meant to teachers to systematically develop their own practice as part of a 'professional learning community' (Vescio *et al.* 2008, Lieberman and Pointer Mace 2009), the research team at Newcastle University undertook narrative interviews with teachers which examined three key areas: the motivation for undertaking practitioner enquiry; the experience for both teachers and students and the support that is needed to facilitate success. This paper examines how the decision to use narrative interviews supported a meaningful and ethical exchange between the teachers and researchers, where knowledge generation was foregrounded, and how despite each teacher producing a unique, highly contextual story, cross narrative themes emerged which have enabled the research team to broaden our understanding of practitioner enquiry.

Background

Learning to Learn in Schools Phase 4 is a research project coordinated by the independent UK charity, the Campaign for Learning (CfL), and funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families. It is facilitated by a team of researchers from the Research Centre for Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University and Durham University. The project involves 41 primary and secondary schools in four Local Authorities (LAs): Enfield, Cheshire and Cornwall and

Northumberland. These LAs represent a wide range of socio-economic contexts across England (for more information see Wall *et al.* 2010).

In each region between nine and twelve schools are involved in the project. These include schools from the primary and secondary age phases including three special schools, plus coordinators of a summer school at LA provider level. *Learning to Learn in Schools Phase 4* builds on research completed in Phases 1 to 3 (Rodd, 2001; 2003; Higgins *et al.* 2007) and since the start of Phase 3, when the current team took over the coordination, it has been characterised by a commitment to practitioner enquiry (Baumfield *et al.* 2008). This commitment has prioritised the exploration of how practitioners are interpreting and defining Learning to Learn (L2L) approaches and how they are making them an integral part of school practice. The practitioner enquiry approach involves cycles of research (running across an academic year), with case studies completed and written up by the teachers using an approach based on Stenhouse's (1981) model of *systematic enquiry made public*. The teachers have been encouraged to initiate changes which they feel are appropriate and that fit with what they believe is the ethos of *Learning to Learn*. They complete the first level of evaluation with an emphasis on evidence that is meaningful to them and their colleagues. Thus the locus of control throughout has been with the teachers rather than the researchers (Higgins *et al.* 2007).

Teachers are motivated to undertake practitioner enquiry for a variety of reasons, whether it is curiosity, a desire to engage in intellectual debate and reflection, an interest in contributing to change in their school and making a difference to inequalities in attainment (Gewirtz *et al.* 2009: 573), involvement in a higher education course (Watkins 2006) or as an important part of professional learning (Elliott 2001). The *Learning to Learn in Schools* project is a collaborative research project where 'teachers are involved in the "construction" and "execution" of research and not just in "applying its findings"' (Elliott 2001: 565). Consequently, the university does not determine the research focus for the teachers involved.

The university team and the Campaign for Learning complement the teachers' focused research by exploring themes that cross school and regional boundaries and through drawing conclusions that can influence practice, theory and policy more generally (Wall and Hall 2005). In this way there is a partnership which develops and incorporates evidence from and dissemination to practice, research and theory and policy communities (McClughlin and Black-Hawkins 2007).

Phase 4 of the *Learning to Learn in Schools* project began in May 2007 and ended in 2011. The teachers involved represent a wide range of experience, both in terms of length of service and also with regard to their involvement in the project. Thus the project includes, for example, Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs), experienced senior leaders, teachers who have been involved since Phase 1 of *Learning to Learn* (2001) and those who have only recently joined. The project draws on the

successful model developed in Learning to Learn Phase 3 with local INSET for teachers, national residentials, email and internet support and national and regional conferences to disseminate and validate the research as it progresses (Wall and Hall 2005).

The aim of this paper is to present a synthesis of the teachers' stories from the 2008 narrative interviews and to explore:

- how the narrative interview structure adopted during the interviews supported the teachers and researchers in generating an authentic picture of the teachers' experiences;
- how the narrative interview structure facilitated the self efficacy of the teachers, thus reflecting the ethos of the project as a whole and creating greater confidence in the validity of the findings.

Exploring teachers' perspectives of their involvement in Learning to Learn

Throughout Phases 3 and 4 of the *Learning to Learn in Schools* project annual telephone interviews have been undertaken with the participating teachers in order to provide the research team and the Campaign for Learning with cross case study data regarding various aspects of teacher involvement in the project. The questions asked during the interviews are designed to examine the teachers' perceptions of what a *Learning to Learn* pupil can do; what a *Learning to Learn* teacher does and what a *Learning to Learn* school is like? (A more detailed discussion of the interviews from Phase 3 can be found in Hall *et al.* 2006).

Whereas in Phase 3 semi-structured interview schedules were designed that contained a range of closed and open questions to be explored, in the summer of 2008, at the end of the first enquiry cycle of Phase 4, the research team made the decision to adopt a 'narrative' interview approach. Narrative interviews are widely recognised as 'a mode through which individuals express their understandings of events and experiences' (Mishler 1991: 68). They focus on facilitating 'a co-construction of the interviewers and the informants experience and understanding of the topic of interest' (Miller and Crabtree 1999: 93) and the interviewer does not follow a detailed interview schedule with specific questions to be answered systematically, but introduces a question or theme that will produce a story (or narrative). As a result the areas that are explored in the interviews 'arise from the interviews themselves and are not predetermined' (Mroz and Letts 2008: 75).

Unlike the earlier semi-structured interviews adopted during Phase 3 (Hall *et al.* 2006), which predetermined to a greater degree the direction of the conversations and thus the emerging themes, the narrative interviews allowed the research team and the Campaign for Learning to cede the locus of

control to the teachers and to create genuine collaboration, thus mirroring the ethos of the practitioner enquiry process adopted in the project more widely. Whilst acknowledging the view that any interview situation produces ‘just one possible version’ of events (Rapley 2001: 303), and that ‘“a wild profusion” lies at the heart of the interview interaction’ (Scheurich, 1995:249) encouraging the teachers to ‘speak in their own voices’ (Mishler, 1991:69) and to discuss what was important and relevant to them reflected more fully the ethos of the project and gave the research team greater confidence in the validity of the findings.

During the 2008 interviews, the teachers were asked to tell a story about the research that they had undertaken which it was hoped would provide a detailed picture of what it felt like to be involved in practitioner enquiry, as well as to gain an understanding of the issues that arose within each context. The resulting narratives obtained would thus enable the research team to broaden its’ understanding of the process of enquiry, and to identify cross narrative themes.

Method

The teachers involved in *Learning to Learn Phase 4* project were approached at the regional INSET days in June 2008 and asked to participate in telephone interviews. Those who agreed were given copies of the interview schedule (which had been piloted with a teacher) to make it possible for them to familiarise themselves with the question and discuss aspects with colleagues if they so wished. (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the schedule) It was acknowledged that in doing so, there was the possibility of this impacting on the data obtained, but it was felt that allowing the teachers to provide a considered opinion would enable them to feel more relaxed and in control of the interview process and indeed increase the validity of the process by supporting the teachers in presenting a more authentic perspective of their practice.

The interviews were carried out by five researchers from Newcastle University during June and July 2008. These researchers had been involved with the L2L project for between 2 and X years. All had participated in previous interviews, attended and presented at INSET and residential events and visited many of the schools. As a consequence the majority of the interviews were carried out with teachers/schools already known to the interviewers and where relationships had been established. Telephone interviews have been used since the start of Phase 3 and so consistency of process has been important. They were chosen largely because they were the most economic way of surveying such a widely distributed project population, however the process was also flexible enough to fit around teachers’ normal routines in schools as well as any unexpected events, such as an Ofsted inspection, as they were easy to rearrange. This meant that we had a high response rate with twenty-five organisations taking part (15 primary schools, eight secondary, two

special schools and a Local Authority based centre). Whilst it is accepted that during telephone interviews both parties are 'deprived of several channels of communication' (Cohen et al, 2011 p.439), research undertaken by Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) in which they compared and analysed data from 21 face-to-face interviews with 22 telephone interviews, found that 'quantitatively, the number of responses did not vary greatly relative to each question. More importantly... the nature and depth of responses did not differ substantially by type of interview'. (p.112). During the Learning to Learn interviews, the combination of providing the schedule in advance of the interviews as well as the existence of established relationships certainly appeared to mitigate against the lack of face-to-face contact.

The broad question at the start of the narrative interview asked the teachers to tell a story about the reasons they had chosen the particular focus for their Learning to Learn research and to give a sense of what it had been like to run an enquiry. The question included possible areas to focus on i.e. motivation, experience of the research and support, and the teachers made individual decisions regarding which information to include in their narratives.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the resulting transcripts subsequently analysed by two members of the research team, one of whom had participated in the telephone interviews and one of whom who had not. Initial interpretative analysis was undertaken based on the 'editing organising style' proposed by Miller and Crabtree (1999: 22):

- Each researcher individually read the transcripts several times in order to identify 'meaningful units' within the narratives.
- The two researchers met and discussed the units they had individually identified and organised these into 'categories'/themes.
- The researchers re-analysed the data in the light of these 'categories'/themes and created charts detailing the occurrence of the themes across the sample
- At the end of this process the entire research team met again to discuss the findings.

To ensure validity of the findings the analysis was validated using a two-stage process. First, in October 2009, the initial categories and themes from the interpretative process were shared with and validated by the teachers at regional INSETs. This was done in an open and questioning manner with opportunities for the teachers to interrogate our analysis and interpretations as well as to give their own perspectives on the anonymised data. The researchers then returned to the university and incorporated this input into the first draft of the annual project report. The teachers were given this draft in January and had the opportunity at the project residential to comment on and make suggestions for further amendments before the final annual report was produced in May 2010 (Wall *et al.* 2010). This meant that while practical considerations mean it is typically the research team who

analyse cross-project data, the team remained committed to validating the findings with the teachers at all possible stages of the analysis and write up.

The narratives co-constructed by the teachers and researchers revealed that much of the experience of undertaking practitioner enquiry is shared by teachers across schools and across sectors. As a result we feel we have been able to reconstruct ‘the many tales told....into a richer more condensed and coherent story’ (Kvale 1996: 199) whilst retaining the authenticity of the teachers’ voices. The ‘Teachers’ story’ that follows and which we are using to facilitate our discussion of narrative interviewing as a research method, is based on the shared themes which were identified during the interview analysis and which occurred in the *majority* of the interviews (see Appendix 2). It is thus, by definition, not the full story - rather we hope to demonstrate the potential for using narratives in this way.

The Teachers’ Story

Motivation

In the early phases of the *Learning to Learn in Schools* project the teachers involved had tended to see themselves as rather ‘eccentric’ (Primary teacher). They had reported that ‘extending their work, sharing their learning, within school has been difficult’ (Higgins *et al.* 2007: 52) and that so much depended upon ‘the agency of particular teachers or small groups, who strive to establish some priority and win resources for Learning to Learn activities’ (Higgins *et al.* 2007: 65). By 2008, there was now a sense that the teachers were able to plan projects that were in line with curriculum foci or initiatives already underway in school.

‘The next phase for us is looking at the curriculum structure itself...The motivation for that came from the emerging flexibility that there is at KS3 curriculum particularly. We are aware that there are major changes for 4 and 5 nationally but KS3 increased flexibility gave us opportunities that we wouldn’t have had. I suppose it fits in mainly because we are interested in increasing the student choice and the flexibility and direction in terms of what they were learning and how they were to learn it.’ (Secondary teacher)

The focus of research centred upon issues that were pertinent to particular classes. For example two primary teachers, who felt that children were starting Year 5 with poor grammar, had devised whole grammar lessons for their pupils, rather than just doing the customary ten minute tasters. They decided to ‘carry on with what we are doing’ and make this ‘a whole research project’. For these teachers, the involvement in the research enabled them to ‘formalise’ what they were doing with their classes which would result in evidence that ‘we didn’t just do that, we made a difference’.

However, undertaking practitioner enquiry did not prove to be an easy experience for all teachers. Problems were experienced with regard to motivation which included a lack of mental space, a lack of inspiration, and difficulties arising from colleagues not having the same motivation. Teacher

agency and ownership, (Steward, 2007) as well as 'space' (Leat 2006) for thinking, were therefore revealed as being a key feature of successful practitioner enquiry.

Experience of the research

The experience of undertaking research was considered to be an overwhelmingly positive one:

'It's been really enjoyable; it's given a different dimension to my teaching.' (Secondary teacher)

'The first time round was one of the best experiences ever in my teaching career and still is. The things that made me think I am not alone here, it was a tremendous experience and it seems to have grown to include people who aren't so eccentric in their thinking' (Primary teacher)

However, there were many obstacles that had to be overcome, including practicalities such as finding the time to undertake the research, responding to changes in staffing and in some cases finding appropriate spaces to undertake activities. It is clear that research within the classroom can be challenging for a variety of reasons.

Models of implementing L2L also varied from school to school. In several examples, lead teacher researchers trialled a new activity/approach each year and in the following year presented their research to the rest of the school, with the hope that they would then trial the practices in their own classrooms. In some schools a core team worked together and in others one or two teachers worked relatively independently, with the degree of senior management involvement varying also. However whilst challenges have undoubtedly arisen in many guises for the L2L teachers, they were positive about their experience of the research project, valuing the process of enquiry and the reflection that it necessitated:

'You find something, you try it, you review it, you analyse it, you change it, you have another go: the cycle.' (Primary teacher)

Teacher Learning

Reflecting on and deconstructing professional practice in order to examine what you do and why you do it is a vital part of professional learning and the development of future practice (Schön 1987, 1991; Lieberman and Pointer Mace, 2009). Vescio *et al.* (2008) identified 'continuous teacher learning' (p.86) as a significant feature of participation in a professional learning community and Lieberman (2009) concluded that 'when teachers inquire into their own practice, they not only reveal to themselves the complexities and possibilities for improvement but also contribute to the field's understanding of teaching and learning' (p.1180). The L2L teachers referred to an increased awareness of their teaching, usually as a direct result of their involvement in the *Learning to Learn* project. This increased awareness enabled them to be more reflective and consequently more able to adapt their teaching as a result of their observations:

'I think I have learnt an awful lot from it, it has made me a lot more aware of how I am teaching the children, how I am working with the children and because of the project I am very conscious

of what the children say about things and making occasional notes. It has made me more aware generally how they talk about their work and trying to get them to think more about their learning rather than I like this subject, I don't like this subject' (Primary teacher)

'So I discussed it with them and said: what do you actually want to do? And they said they wanted to make it more interactive, so I re-developed it again' (Secondary teacher)

But undertaking a research project, reflecting upon your teaching and beginning the process of transforming how you teach, can be a daunting experience, especially if it involves taking risks and departing from a more comfortable style of teaching – i.e. one in which teacher views are dominant. For the teachers who were prepared to take these risks it resulted in new ideas about the relationship between teacher learning and pupil learning - a relationship in which pupils are viewed as partners in learning:

'The hardest thing is letting them do the leading and I think that first term they probably didn't, cause I'd had in my head, I knew what my topic area was and I kind of thought, oh that would lend itself brilliantly to history and opening a museum and all of that. So I really led that so it wasn't as open as it could be, do you know what I mean? I kind of had in mind what I thought would happen whereas the following term when we were doing sugar I decided I would be really brave and I would let them decide. And that was quite scary really.' (Primary teacher)

'Yes I think that it makes you more aware that they have their own ideas and you don't have to fill them up, they are no empty vessels, which has sometimes been thought in the past, especially by the powers that be. You teach children this, this and this and they will learn great things and it is actually rubbish, they come with their own ideas and you have to work with them.' (Primary teacher)

As discussed by MacBeath et al. (2009), when teachers see themselves as learners they provide their pupils with a role model to be emulated. There is evidence that the teachers involved in the L2L project further saw themselves and their pupils as partners, with learning consequently being a reciprocal process. The very act of undertaking practitioner enquiry and reflecting upon teaching and learning – much of which was undertaken collaboratively with the pupils - demonstrated to all concerned that learning is a lifelong process and one in which all can and should participate.

Pupil experience and learning

A focus on pupil learning has been established as a fundamental prerequisite for any innovation in teaching and learning and changes in school/teaching cultures (Wall 2008, Hopkins *et al.* 1994). The teachers confirmed that it was the learning of their students and the benefits that the enquiry process might bring to them - the development of dispositions and skills that will enable pupils to become independent lifelong learners - that sustained their involvement in *Learning to Learn*.

The teachers were aware that pupils were beginning to develop a greater understanding of their own learning and the benefits that this knowledge might bring. The teachers described improvements in attainment, creativity and reasoning, but predominantly that pupils were beginning to take more ownership of and responsibility for their learning and that this was impacting on engagement:

'Certainly in terms of the students being more engaged and responding well to the opportunity. One very tenuous link seems to be if you increase the student's responsibility for what happens and how to do it and if you increase the amount of choice to how they structure it and what the out come will look like you will increase engagement.' (Secondary teacher)

These characteristics – the ability to be resourceful and find the appropriate tool/strategy needed for a task, or to be responsible, and not just look to the teacher for answers – were ones that the teachers were keen to see being developed:

'All the children have been a lot more independent at using it as they no longer look for me to almost confirm their self-assessment, they're getting very good at judging whether their piece of writing, how good it would be or whether they'd included the things that they needed to.' (Primary teacher)

Involvement in the project had resulted in the pupils starting to talk more about their learning, with a shift in many cases from 'emphasis on content to the actual process of learning' (Primary teacher). Learners were also beginning to see themselves in a more active than passive role, and significantly, also beginning to understand that they are developing skills for lifelong learning, that 'all they are learning will feed into what they are learning in the future' (Primary teacher).

Sources of support and information

Research suggests that teachers and schools engaging in knowledge creation require the support of professional learning communities (McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins 2007, Vescio *et al.* 2008). These communities may be within schools or clusters of schools, they may involve partnerships with universities.

The *Learning to Learn* teachers described the role of the university as one of enabling, both in terms of help with the process of research and with motivation in times of difficulty. The bi-annual INSET days and national residential organised by the university and the Campaign for Learning were also considered to be extremely valuable:

'It is finding the balance and when you get the support from outside like yourselves and the Campaign for Learning and the opportunities, it refocuses you and keeps that interest going and inspires me all over again.' (Primary teacher)

'Sometimes it can feel a lonely thing within the school but the University is always there, you get your regular emails of what is going on and updates and things and even just getting a note of something that is going on gives you a link of bringing you back and knowing that there are people there if I need anything.' (Primary teacher)

Generally it appeared that these opportunities for face to face discussion renewed enthusiasm, energised teachers and encouraged them to keep things going. The opportunity to hear speakers and

new ideas was valued, as was the opportunity to talk to colleagues. However, some teachers did feel that the opportunities to network could be further facilitated:¹

'When we went to the residential it would have been really nice to have been able to have networked a little bit more, to maybe group with people who were doing similar projects. We could have discussed what we were doing and bounced ideas off each other.' (Primary teacher)

An interesting development from previous years of L2L was the degree to which teachers were finding support from within their own schools. This support ranged from encouragement and enthusiasm for the project, to being given specific time for research, and to others getting involved themselves:

'Well mainly some of the staff who I think it's their NQT year or their year following NQT have said they've really enjoyed being involved and please may they be involved next year. Having such an enthusiastic team of staff, I mean I think we've had 14 staff, who have all volunteered to join in, and having staff who have actually volunteered to lead workshops.' (Secondary teacher)

Similarly having the support of the senior management also seemed to be significant with evidence showing that a lack of leadership could hinder the success of the research.

'It's difficult when you're all in different departments ... It's not worked as well as I would have hoped to be completely honest. But that's more about the time constraints and so on and I think when ... nobody's actually in charge, officially in charge, it's really difficult.' (Secondary teacher)

In the same way that pupils need to be supported by their peers, schools and families as they learn, teachers also need support to continue with their professional learning. The L2L 'community' - made up of the Campaign for Learning, the University team and the teachers from all the schools involved in the project - has been shown to provide the collaborative support, inspiration and enthusiasm necessary for the L2L teachers to sustain their enquiries and thus their learning.

Conclusion

The decision to undertake a narrative approach in the L2L Phase 4 interviews 2008 embodied the values of the project as a whole. The interview schedule reflected the ethos of the project, with its commitment to prioritising the views of the practitioners involved, thus transferring the locus of control away from the researchers to the teachers. It invited the teachers to reflect upon their experiences and to tell stories about their individual contexts. These stories were then reconstructed by the research team into a 'richer more condensed and coherent story' (Kvale, 1996: 199) – a synthesis that mirrors the project methodology with its emphasis on cross case study analysis and generalisable outcomes.

¹ The opportunity to network in a more formal way was consequently trialled at the Autumn 2009 INSETs and the 2009 national residential when teachers were asked to present and then discuss their research in groups. This proved to be extremely successful and was continued in 2010.

Whilst interviewing as a research method has been identified as creating an asymmetrical power relationship which favours the interviewer (Kvale, 1996; Limerick *et al.* 1996; Vincent and Warren, 2001), we agree with Limerick *et al.* (1996) that the ‘dynamics of power’ within any given interview ‘shift according to the phase of the interview process and the unique research relationship established between researcher and participant’ (p.458). In the context of the Learning to Learn project, the narrative structure, which encouraged reflective story telling, and the existence of well established relationships between the teachers and the research team, lead us to conclude that during the 2008 interviews the dynamics of power shifted favourably towards the teachers being interviewed, creating a more ethical exchange.

The story of practitioner enquiry which emerged when the teacher narratives were analysed and synthesised did not contain themes that were particularly surprising and which have been previously identified in the literature: the importance of teacher agency (Stoll and Fink, 1996; Steward, 2007; Wall *et al.* 2010), the importance of reflective practice and continuous professional learning (Schön, 1987, 1991; Lieberman and Pointer Mace, 2009), the importance of focusing on pupil learning (Hopkins *et al.* 1994; Wall, 2008) and the importance of the support of a professional learning community (McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins, 2007; Vescio *et al.* 2008). However, because the narratives were generated by the teachers themselves, the research team is confident that the cross narrative themes presented in the teachers’ story retain the authenticity of their voices and that a ‘qualitative truth’ (Miller and Crabtree, 1999:107) has emerged which preserves the ‘multivocality and complexity of the lived experience’. (ibid:109). Crucially, the fact that the narrative interview method produced results which support earlier academic research demonstrates the reliability of using narrative as an interview method. Our initial concerns as a research team were that the narratives produced during the interviews would be so disparate and so long and unwieldy that we would be unable to draw any conclusions regarding the experience of practitioner enquiry in the context of the Learning to Learn project. However, this proved not to be the case, with themes emerging across the interviews and more complete stories which were not dominated by interviewer questions. As a consequence we believe that the narrative interview approach adopted in the 2008 interviews added validity to our findings, and has helped to broaden the research team’s understanding of practitioner enquiry in the Learning to Learn in Schools Project. Importantly it also mirrored the ethos of the project as a whole – a commitment to valuing the experiences of the teachers as a route to a more authentic understanding of enquiry in schools.

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Appendix 1

Learning to Learn Phase 4

Interview schedule Year 1 (2008)

Housekeeping

Confirm name and school.

If not interviewed last year clarify age, time in school and role.

If interviewed last year confirm role remains the same

Narrative interview

I'd like you to tell me a story about your research this year, one that gives me the reasons you chose the particular focus for this year's Learning to Learn project and gives me a sense of what it has been like for you running the enquiry. It's not necessary for you to tell me everything that has happened! This can be any story or incident, it doesn't have to be definitive, just an illustration.

Key areas:

motivation to look at this area rather than another

experience of research - positive, negative and interesting

sources of information and support

Although we have identified areas that we think are 'key', please feel free to focus on the most significant aspect for you.

Narrative interviews are a change from our usual more structured approach. We're doing these this year as a way of making sure that we don't narrow down the field too early on. The idea is that by allowing you to tell us stories from your enquiries, we'll get a broader perspective on what being involved in Learning to Learn is like and important themes that we haven't thought of will emerge from what you tell us.

Thanks for your time and input!

Appendix 2





